CHAPTER THREE

The Rain in Little Tokyo

As the last daylight bleeds from the sky, and the storm overtakes the horizon, Little Tokyo's neon arteries flicker and die with the light. The usually bustling district empties into a lifeless urban sprawl, with 'CLOSED DUE TO WEATHER' signs swinging forlornly in storefront windows.

A figure on a rickety bicycle weaves through rain-slicked streets, one hand desperately clutching an umbrella. Emily Lenwood's glasses are fogging with every breath, making it hard for her to spy what shops are still open on Central Avenue.

"Oh, you're just the master of poor life choices, Emily," she mutters while narrowly avoiding a pothole. Her free hand fumbles with the umbrella, wind threatening to snatch it away.

"Note to self: invent a water-proof backpack with an

umbrella attachment. Patent pending."

Too late. As Emily rounds another corner, the wind finally wrenches the umbrella free. She watches helplessly as it tumbles over the roof tops and away.

"No, no, no," she groans, hunching over her handlebars. Her focus quickly shifts to her backpack, it's contents infinitely more precious than any umbrella. Two years of her life's work lie within: her custom-built augmented reality glasses, her code database, research papers, and the beginning of her dissertation on the next-gen human-computer interfaces. Without it, she is dead. Simply dead. And now all of it is stuck in the rain, just like her.

"Come on, Emily," she pleads with herself, pedaling harder. "You've presented at SIGCHI, SIGGRAPH, and REACT conferences. Why can't you outsmart the weather?"

Water squelches in her shoes with every stroke. Her sodden shirt clings to her like a second skin as she shivers. For a moment, she imagines being home, warm and dry, launching into her favorite AR world using her self-designed headset.

As Emily rounds another corner, the Caltech sticker on her bike frame peels away into the wind - much like her evening plans of studying. Her eyes dart between the treacherous road

and stormy sky, searching for shelter. Rain-streaks continue to assault her view, hiding the deep puddle ahead of her until the moment she hits it with a splash.

"Aiiyeeeee!" She cries and overcorrects, jerking her handlebars wildly as she fights for balance. All the world blurs into a kaleidoscope image of rain and motion until she finally careens into a row of trash cans, and comes skidding to a stop.

By some miracle, she finds herself still upright when it all finally ends. Though with one foot in a takeout box and a banana peel crowning her head.

"Owwww," she whimpers, her heart still pounding and the world seeming to swim around her eyes.

A warm glow cuts through the gloom, catching Emily's eyes despite her rain-streaked lenses. She carefully kicks off the takeout box, plucks the peel from her hair, and inches forward, squinting to make out the details.

Between two dilapidated buildings, a tiny wooden porch comes into focus. It's a battered, nigh-forgotten place, crammed with old boxes and worn-out crates. Yet a few red paper lanterns dangle from the rafters, casting a warm light onto the center where a cable spool sits on its side as a makeshift table.

Emily freezes in places as she realizes several old men are

staring back at her, each perched atop a crate. Their leathered faces are etched in surprise, or perhaps suspicion, at her arrival. Dice lie forgotten in their gnarled hands, their game interrupted.

To the lot of them, Emily barely manages to stutter a small, "Um... hi?"

A dreadful silence hangs in the air until a sharp voice cuts through, drawing attention to the dark doorway behind the men.

"Nani yatten no, baka janai no? Kaze demo hiku ki ka?" A middle-aged woman bursts from the shadows like a charging ram, quick enough that the men in her path are flinching before shuffling out of her way. Her face, though much nicer than any of theirs, still spiders with the fine lines of many years. Her dark eyes lock onto Emily, unwavering and intense. The corners of her mouth wind tightly across her gaunt cheeks as she glares. A cigarette hangs between her marble knuckles. Emily feels the hair prickle along her neck.

"Um…. Uh… Sumimasen?" she replies with meager Japanese. "I'm not actually Japanese. Although I maybe look it… Um. *Wakarimasen*?" Her hand instinctively twitches towards her forehead, reaching for the AR glasses that aren't there.

The woman's eyebrows furrow as she processes Emily's blank expression. Then, in perfect English: "Come inside, girl. You're drenched." She tosses the cigarette and turns back into the shadowy doorway.

Grateful for the invitation, Emily grabs her backpack before dropping the damnable bicycle in place. She scrambles towards the door, eager to escape the men's unsettling stares.

Stepping inside, Emily is enveloped by a cocoon of warm steam and the aroma of simmering broth. More red lanterns light the hall through which the older woman glides. Her bright, flower-adorned Kimono is a stark contrast to the bland 80's era paneling that lines the walls.

Emerging into the interior, Emily finds herself surrounded by more wooden paneling. But as her eyes adjust, she begins to also see a series of bright but worn murals adorning the walls. Most of them contain typical scenes out of Japan: Mount Fuji poking above lavender clouds, and delicate cherry blossoms billowing in a spring sky.

Then the lightning flashes through the windows, and Emily spies that between the peaceful scenes are murals with far more sinister countenance. A wolf monster snarls at her from one. Hulking ogres with twisted horns and toothy maws grin at her

from others. Dark spirits with large wings, and long noses dance like devils at the corners of another.

Emily blinks wildly at the unsightly monsters surrounding her as a tiny shiver crawls up her spine.

"Sit, sit. You're dripping all over my floor," the woman commands, pointing to the nearest booth. "I'll bring some soup to warm you up."

"Um, you don't have to-" Emily's protest dies on her lips as the woman's attention snaps onto a face that Emily sees peeking out between the kitchen doors.

"HACHI!" The woman's voice cracks like thunder. "Stop gawking and get back to work you lazy good-for-nothing." Emily flinches as the woman slams herself through the swinging kitchen doors, leaving a wake of spit-fire Japanese in her path.

Alone at last, Emily slogs to the booth and slumps into place. Though her eyes are still lingering on all the eerie monster murals surrounding her. Monsters that she could swear are watching her back, with their devilish eyes.

She shivers again, and draws her glance elsewhere. Hoping to ignore them. With trembling fingers, she begins to unzip her bag, dreading what she might find. But the time has come to assess her cargo, and see how much of her college work remains

intact. If any at all…